*Symbols of the season*

# At Christmas time: Tinsel and Hay

By REV. EDWARD LEONARD, Pastor, Memorial United Methodist Church

There are symbols to Christmas, familiar things that remind us vividly what the season is. Some of them are the smell of turkey, smell of pine or cedar in the house, colored lights, songs full of joy and cheer, etc.

There are also two other symbols, tinsel and hay. Tinsel is the glittering, silvery threads that we hang on the tree, and is symbolic of the superficial celebration of the holy day. Hay is dried grass of the field that was found in the manger which became the bed of the baby Jesus.

Tinsel represents the glistening, showy things of the world which immediately catch our eye. From birth, our attention is first directed to the tinsel, the surface beauty. It is seen at Christmas in all the pains we take to brighten the outsides of houses, street light poles, the artificial aluminum tree with metalic balls, and the shiny new chrome of toys. These are the gaudy and dazzling sights that astound us.

The tinsel also represents the trumpets and fanfare of power. In Jesus' day, there were the royal courts with extravagant displays of gold and silver. It was true of Herod and Caesar, and still is in the lives of people who live only on the surface.

Tinsel, then, is a symbol of what is secondary in our world. They are the things that hide what is elemental that come and go from one year to the next, eroded with age while the Christ comes to stay. Tinsel is the non essential of life, like artificial icicles and snow that are impressive, but can be packed away for a whole year without any real loss. We put them in a box and simply label them, "Christmas decorations."

Hay is different. It represents the deeper meaning of Christmas as we draw from the Bible story. The setting is told also in the children's hymn:

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
The Little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

Hay is the commonplace stuff of life. It is elemental, for all God's creatures depend on it. It springs from the rich soil of the earth, is tended by the sun. It is the ordinary grasses that cover the fields. It is the clothes of the field that, when dried, is used to feed the animals like those in the cattle stalls of Bethlehem. It is found everywhere as food for the animals that are used for beasts of burden as well as food.

The Christmas story Luke tells is outwardly very unglamorous. He tells us that the baby Jesus was wrapped in rough, ordinary cloth and lain in a hay-filled manager. Yet, what was unglamorous was to be found glorious. From that bed of hay have come our highest thoughts of God, the noblest estimate of man and the standards by which we are to live as children of God. Also from that hay filled manager has come the abiding presence of a Lord who gives us power to live by the standards of love and peace.

The whole scene of that first Christmas was so common - a little town, Bethlehem, which would have been long forgotten. Everything seemed so ordinary that people in the inn next door paid no attention. The shepherds on the hillside would have missed it had not angel's voices aroused their curiosity. Even when the Wise Men came, they stopped at Herod's glittering palace before moving on to the barn with its lowly manager.

The gospel according to Matthew affirms the words of the prophet: "A virgin will conceive and bear a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel,' a name which means 'God is with us.'" (1:23) That is the message of Christmas. Each celebration of Christmas is simply a declaration that God is with us, he shares with us on human terms. We accept the mystery and live in its truth. We know God in Jesus who lived with common people, not in palaces; who preferred hay to tinsel.

When Jesus was born, it was in a common building, rude and open. As he traveled on foot, he soiled his feet with the dust of the ground we all share. His ministry took him to places where the despised and sick called out in pain from the loss of hope. The only time he entered the rooms of royalty and power was to be mocked and beaten. The great and good news of it all is that, beginning with Christmas, God is lowly enough to dwell among the lowliest of us. For none of us are of noble birth.

Ask yourself where, in your own experience, does God make his presence known. Is it in the rare and flashing comet that comes and goes quickly or in the common glory of dawn and sunset? Is it in the singular splendor of one great saint or in the saintliness of common kindness among ordinary folk?

Some people have a constant and humble manner of doing good that puts most of us to shame. We have all the good intentions but feel we cannot do anything unless we have some elaborate committee or highly publicized charity. Committees and charities do their good but usually toward people at a distance. There is a style of kindness that is, however, as unglamorous as hay, but essential to life on earth. That is the every-day, person-to-person sharing which reaches out where we live, to the people we see. That is more than just giving something at Christmas. It is meeting human need all year when it occurs.

But it is easier to give a turkey or toy to the needy at Christmas than concern ourselves for a whole year. So many who receive charity at Christmas would be better off and sense more dignity with common kindnesses through the year.

This is true also in our families. One busy father, who had spent little time with his growing children, placed an envelope for each of them on the Christmas tree. Expecting money, the children were surprised to open them and see a written promise to give each of them some of his time each day of the year. And we hear quite often of children doing the same for their parents. There are many stories of how children have given their parents the gifts of a promise to do ordinary tasks. Thus they give the gift of time, the promise to be a vital part of the family.

It is far easier to give a child a new bicycle, radio, television, increase in allowance or almost any other material gift than it is to bestow the gift of time. It is also far easier to give parents silver candlesticks, a toaster or valuable cut glass than to give them time. Time is elemental, the stuff of which years are made. It is an unglamorous gift, without glitter and seemingly small because we are taught to measure value by chrome and cost. But time is basic. It is more like hay than tinsel.

It was the gift of time the shepherds brought to Christ. It was time the wise men took from busy schedules to find a child. It was time Jesus gave in his short years of ministry, not books or plans.

Time, the common, ordinary thing that makes up our days is the symbol of Christmas. It is the story of God with us. Here, then, is a rule for us in measuring both wisdom and religious devotion: to use the weak, ordinary, common-place in finding God and sharing good news. With time we receive the birth of a Savior little, weak and hidden on a bed of hay in an obscure town.


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*(And oh, what a mess!)*

# 'Twas the night before Christmas

By FRANCES PAULETTE

"'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house....." What a mess! "Every year it seems to get worse," Sound familiar?

Does it always have to be this way, you ask? Never enough time, never quite finished with the task of gift wrapping until the very last minute? And then, there is that last dish to be made for the big dinner on Christmas day. Is there any end to this business of getting ready for Christmas?

Cheer up, my friend, it doesn't have to be that way! There are lots of little ideas and tricks to make the holiday a more joyous time for everyone, even Mom!

Planning is the key word!

"But," you quickly think, "I'm not a planner and after all, so much is happening around the holiday season that it's hard to make plans and stick to them."

Throw out the old saying, "You can't teach an old dog a new trick." All of us 'old dogs' can learn new tricks to make the holiday season a lot more pleasant.

If you didn't shop early this year, then get a head start next year before the crowds get heavy and while selection is good. Another thing, don't try to keep up with the Joneses.....know your budget limitations and plan your shopping accordingly.

Check with family and friends about sizes, colors, and preferences. If in doubt, choose a gift certificate or even a gift of money. They're always acceptable except, maybe, in the case of very young children.

When buying for children, give careful consideration to the age of the child, especially if you're choosing books or toys. The most important single factor in selecting toys is safety. While manufacturers are becoming more and more safety conscious, there still may be some toys on the market that could be hazardous. Caution is the word.

Holiday meals-it's great when all the family gathers for a big, leisurely dinner with all the traditional dishes and maybe a few new ones. But, this bountiful feast takes work! A little planning helps a lot.

Check table linens, napkins, place mats, and polish silver ahead of time. Shop early for those foods which can be frozen or kept. Not only shop early, but prepare and freeze as much as possible before the big day. Check recipes ahead of time to be sure you have all the necessary ingredients, especially if you're trying a new one.

Have a central location for gift wrapping if possible. Choose a table in the utility area, or a little-used room and keep necessary wrapping supplies there. If you're one of those wrap as you buy individuals, keep ribbon, paper, tags, scotch tape, scissors, etc., in a large basket or plastic bag to use when needed. No hunting or looking at the last minute.

And then there's decorating. Nothing sets the mood for Christmas more than the smell of freshly cut evergreens and bayberry candles and nothing lifts the spirit more than holly, red ribbons and poinsettias.

It's always nice to have your local florist create a beautiful arrangement for table, mantle, or foyer, but if funds are limited, don't dispair. Your home can be beautiful using greens from shrubs and trees native to your area or those that are part of your landscape pattern. Magnolia, pine, fir, with ribbons and fruit make for a traditionally beautiful Christmas. Let your imagination go a bit, design arrangements that express the real you....be creative!


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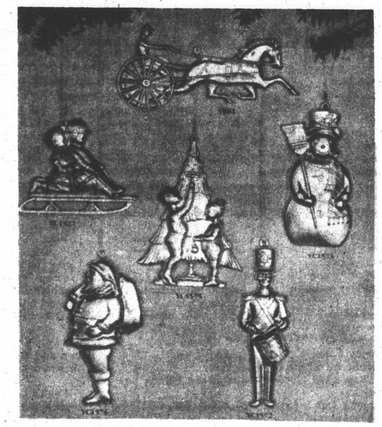

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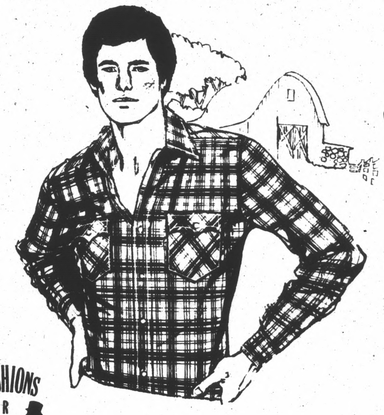

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